



## The Spatiotemporal Dynamics of Digital News Audiences

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# THE SPATIOTEMPORAL DYNAMICS OF DIGITAL NEWS AUDIENCES

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## Introduction

The changing patterns of news consumption in a digital era bring about new configurations between audiences, information, the devices upon which they consume it and the different (mobile) places and (shiftable) times when and where this is possible. Coupled with the rapid proliferation of news and informational sources arising alongside this – sometimes from the ashes of ‘legacy’ media, sometimes from Silicon Valley, occasionally via the goodwill of crowdsourced funding – trying to keep up with what ‘news’ and ‘journalism’ exactly ‘is’ in a digital era perplexes even the most avid and insightful observer. This is seemingly odd and somewhat paradoxical; as some commentators in recent years have wryly noted, journalism is like pornography or obscenity, ‘we know it when we see it’. Yet while a good line, a reasonable question to ask ourselves is: do we? What we do seem to know fairly unequivocally is that much of the confusion and concern wrought by the changing media landscape is less about what journalism ‘is’ anymore but – quite crucially – what uses people still have for it, which functions are being created anew, and whether or not journalism ‘as we knew it’ will remain financially viable.

Journalism studies, and media and communication studies more broadly, have tried – and are still in the process of trying – to come to grips with these changing dynamics (e.g. Zelizer, 2009; Peters and Broersma, 2013). The contributions comprising this Companion trace such debates in the current age and try to look forward simultaneously. This particular chapter articulates a position that a constructive place to begin thinking through digital journalism’s possible futures and the impact of the shifts transforming the media landscape is to start with, in Jay Rosen’s (2006) phrase, ‘the people formerly known as the audience’. Audiences matter if for no other reason than without them, the purpose of producing journalism in any era is somewhat meaningless, whether or not one is speaking economically, democratically, or socioculturally. So establishing what is happening in terms of audience or user dynamics should prove fairly central to digital journalism scholarship. Much of the academic focus over the past decade has attempted to do precisely this, considering the changing relationship between media producers and consumers, although typically focussing on what empowerment of the latter means for the former in terms of user generated content and participation more broadly. However, there is a growing emphasis not just on the content people provide to news outlets but on the changing experiences of audiences in the contemporary digitalized age; an ‘audience turn’, if you will, which posits the necessity of going beyond highly informative, but essentially descriptive, quantitative foci on changing patterns of use (e.g. Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015) to consider novel meanings and experiences people associate with journalism (see Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2014; Heikkilä and Ahva, 2015).

Within this move toward the audience, a crucial aspect, but one often overlooked, is the role space plays in the relation between journalism and audiences’ experiences of consuming it (see Peters, 2015). This chapter highlights the need to address this absence by first focusing on interrelated changes in the media ecology necessary to grasp the newfound complexity of media consumption. Specifically, it outlines how audience engagement with news and different spatiotemporal configurations made possible by digital technology are trends that complement and reinforce one another in terms of changing the socially-situated affordances of news use and the composition of our ‘communication geography’ (Adams and Jansson, 2012). Having sketched these contours, the chapter then highlights analytical challenges for understanding and conceptualizing the new interrelations between digital news content, production, and consumption, grounding this analysis with insights that emphasize the significance of spatiotemporal dynamics. The emphasis here is on the interrelations and mobilities of digital news audiences, based on a recognition of the productive impacts of media use while being careful to note the limitations of a paradigm shift that points solely to the possibilities generated

by the ubiquitous presence of media in our everyday lives. The conclusion broadens this conversation to consider what this all means in terms of the societal role of journalism. Aspects of interaction and personalization beget by new media technologies certainly shape the possibilities, practices and power audiences have to choose news wherever, whenever, and however they want. However, this simultaneously challenges the conventional routines and symbolic power of journalism as a place where, metaphorically, people can come together.

### **Changes in the digital media landscape**

Expressed broadly, the places and spaces of news consumption matter, and matter significantly, for how people choose, interpret, and attend to the news. More specifically, we can say that changing spatiotemporal configurations of media use facilitated by technological developments tend to change how information is communicated, and is oftentimes associated with significant sociocultural transformations (Meyrowitz, 1986). In this sense, the modification and emergence of different spaces of consumption, accompanying the rise of new media technologies, changes what news 'is' (Peters, 2012). The slowly growing recognition of this in digital journalism studies touches upon the interrelation of audience engagement with media and our sense of place (see Nyre, 2012; Banaji and Cammaerts, 2015; Dickens, Couldry and Fotopoulou, 2015; Picone, Courtois and Paulussen, 2015; Schmitz Weiss, 2015). The manner in which both are transforming greatly impacts the media ecology in which news consumption occurs, as journalism transitions from its highly privileged institutional station to one that is increasingly situated – from the perspective of the audience – as merely one of many possible information providers designed to be informative, interactive, civically- and technologically-engaging. Looking to the emerging practices of news audiences in this sense is instructive, because it encourages us to frame questions, 'not to media considered as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes, but to what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act' (Couldry, 2012: 35). Conceptualizing such a media sociology means considering how audiences' old habits become 'de-ritualized' and re-evaluated in everyday life. To do this robustly, attention to engagement and spatiotemporality are key.

#### *Audience engagement (afforded by digital culture)*

The story of journalism pre-digital technology was one where – pragmatically – interaction with the audience was fairly limited. While letters to the editor, call-ins to radio shows and the like existed, fundamentally news was primarily a one-way form of mass communication where 'all the news that's fit to print' came down from media institutions on high. Classical notions about the different functions of the press in a democracy reflected such realities: news was an information source, a watchdog, a representative for the people, and so forth. Even though most accounts were quick to note that journalism should provide a 'public forum' to discuss issues – the classic idea of a public sphere, albeit interpreted in a variety of ways over the years – at best one could say that pre-digital journalism gave fodder for individuals to discuss issues of public concern amongst themselves; within the pages of the daily newspaper or on the nightly news, the space for members of the public to contribute meaningfully was in truth quite constrained. This, of course, is one of the great observations of the shift beget by web 2.0 technologies; by reducing the distance previously experienced between audiences and media institutions, this 'new wave' of journalism is said to promote interactivity by facilitating participation in the news.

This shift is certainly noteworthy for it potentially changes how audiences experience the news they encounter and how, conversely, encounters by audiences help to shape the news (Allan and Peters, 2015a). There has been a significant uptick in research in digital journalism studies which focusses on how journalism providers now marshal immediate, first-hand experience from, depending on analytic stress, amateurs, users, or citizens in different possible

places. Similarly, the rise of manifest game-changing innovations, such as blogs, UGC hubs, crowdsourcing, Facebook, and Twitter, to name a few, have been studied, helping to broaden our understandings of how audiences – often in their role as citizens – increasingly find their way into news content (see Allan, 2013). These developments have prominent implications for journalism as a societal institution, recasting its boundaries (Carlson and Lewis, 2015) and potentially leading to a more collaborative ethos of connectivity in a digital era that, almost by necessity, is increasingly defined by and mandates co-operation between news organizations and audiences. ‘News organizations willing to recast journalism anew, namely by making the most of this potential to forge cooperative relationships between professionals and their citizen counterparts, will secure opportunities to rethink its forms, practices and epistemologies at a time of considerable scepticism about future prospects,’ remark Allan and Peters (2015a: 10). Such collaborative approaches demand not only innovation and creativity, but mutual respect and dialogue.

Understanding this fundamental shift in the relationship and power dynamics between news organizations and audiences is critical if we want to map the way digital audiences are changing their rituals and practices surrounding journalism. It is not enough to say what device a person chooses to get news or when they do it, the sociocultural functions served by consuming and potentially interacting with the news are dynamic, and what has transformed is indeed a greater possibility for locating ourselves within the story. In this regard thinking spatiotemporally about audiences’ uses of journalism has both literal and figurative associations – from the specific where and when of consumption, to the way we locate ourselves relationally against this information and, by association, within the wider world around us.

#### *Spatiotemporal configurations (reconfigured by digital technology)*

Bearing this in mind, when we speak of spatiotemporal configurations of news consumption we are not only speaking about the ‘hard facts’ of where, when, how-often and so forth, we are trying to plug into socially-situated affordances from use. A basic insight of much spatial theory (see Lefebvre, 1991; Smith, 2008) is that trying to decouple the spatial – or perhaps more accurately, spatiotemporal – from the socio-political is erroneous, for space-time is simultaneously physical (locations and movement), conceptual (how we conceive of and ‘map’ it) and social (created and experienced by people). One brief example can highlight how these multifaceted and interrelated aspects are all necessary to appreciate the significance of media for communicative practices, including news consumption. The development of the smartphone and its associated apps, for instance, changes audiences’ everyday patterns of news consumption and locations of news use (physical space), like checking news during the ‘in between’ periods of life such as waiting for public transit (Dimmick et al., 2011). Such changes also prompt news organizations to rethink how they conceive of the audience (conceptual space); asking for crowdsourced, active contributions such as photos or videos as breaking news unfolds is now commonplace and relates to the ways audience engagement and news events themselves are conceived (Vis, 2013). And finally, the way people view socio-situational orientations of news consumption is impacted. Social media technologies such as the smartphone facilitate news streams, allowing people to infuse personal meaning into storytelling and, though its online and mobile capabilities, traverse public, private and virtual spaces simultaneously (de Souza e Silva, 2006). In other words, smartphones allow novel experiential possibilities for news audiences, creating a liminal space that Papacharissi (2015: 36) terms electronic ‘elsewheres’, which is to say geo-social, hybrid media environments that permit citizens to ‘access content in transition and find their own place in the story, alongside journalists, who already possess an institutionally assigned place in the story.’

All these considerations come into play with the growing attention on locative media in journalism, a trend that highlights spatiotemporality as:

a cardinal, orienting, and increasingly user-defined aspect of mobile news production and its consumption. ... Locative technologies, such as geospatial positioning (GPS) data and geo-tagging, have been critical to the 'cartographic' turn in news, where events are mapped and user input invited to the construction of place through images or witness accounts. In turn audiences now expect to be able to search and aggregate news based on locational indicators and also to position themselves *vis-à-vis* events and places, via location annotated posts to social media. (Goggin, Martin, and Dwyer, 2015: 44).

Conceptually-speaking, media consumption is thus both real and symbolic, shaping our spatiotemporal experiences of news in terms of positioning us simultaneously in relation to information as well as how we use it to engage, or disengage, with the world around us. And while the speed, scale and complications of digital news reporting are complex and understandably invite suggestions that spatial aspects of (mobile, social, locational) news consumption matter more now than ever before, it is important to recall that such emerging configurations are not merely a property of the digital era. When thinking 'spatiotemporally' about news use it is helpful to keep in mind that 'the frameworks from within which we watch and listen, muse and remember, are defined in part by where we are in the world, and where we think we are, and sometimes too, of course, by where we might wish to be' (Silverstone, 1999: 86). Digital configurations of news use are different from what came before and worth specifying, but despite these shifting contours in the media environment, spatiotemporal configurations of consumption are in fact nothing new – they are merely more adaptable.

### **Analytical challenges for studying digital news audiences**

It is not only within journalism studies that many are asking how transforming audience practices in the changing media and communication environment are correspondingly transforming societies (see COST 2014). Concepts quickly (re)gaining currency within the broader field of media and communication research include mobility (e.g. Jones et al., 2013), embodiment (e.g. Farman, 2013); and materiality (e.g. Packer and Wiley, 2013), representing attempts to come to grips with how people are using digital media, the societal significance of associated informational streams, and what meanings and experiences accompany contemporary media consumption. A consideration of spatiotemporality ties into all of these, demanding that analytic consideration be furnished on the pathways of information, and the different ways that audiences come to navigate within, challenge, and/or create such spaces simultaneously. In terms of journalism more specifically, a couple analytical prisms are worth considering in this regard, namely: the interrelations between people, places and things, especially media devices and platforms; and mobilities, in the sense of how and where journalism fits with the flows of everyday life.

#### *Interrelations (People, Places and Things)*

Many of the headlines that capture journalistic attention regarding the influence of new media devices on journalism tend to focus squarely on usage rates. X% now use tablets, Y% accessed a news story via Facebook last week, Z% paid for digital content. While intriguing, when viewed in isolation, such statistics on the use or preferences surrounding new media devices provide only a small glimpse of the overall picture. Rather than simply think about how people – news audiences in this case – use things – digital versus traditional media devices – conceptually there is a richer tapestry to be made from a relational view of media use that looks to interrelations within everyday life. As Pink and Leder Mackley (2013: 683) note of such a holistic perspective, conceptually it makes sense to form research questions and design by considering three

analytical prisms, ‘environment/place; movement/practice; [and] perception/sensory embodied experience.’ Related to recent ‘turns’ in contemporary social theory (i.e. spatial, mobility, sensorial, material) the point is that static theory which tries to compartmentalize uses of media to exclude these considerations will necessarily be somewhat impoverished. Of course, such in-depth analysis, typically afforded by ethnographic approaches, is time consuming, costly and intrusive, meaning that it suffers – in some eyes – from an inability to make claims on a grand scale. Even surveys, long derided for self-reporting biases and lack of depth but well-received in policy circles, now face stiff competition in an age of ‘big data’ where ‘hard evidence’ from our digital footprint is but a click away and is said by some (e.g. Webster, 2014) to be the best foundation for robust knowledge of how people use the digital resources at their disposal. Nonetheless, it is worth embracing an ‘ecological’ perspective as a starting point despite these challenges and shortcomings, for if we want to address complex issues, or even know which questions to ask, we need to account for, among other considerations: the spatiotemporal contexts of consumption; engagement with the information itself (‘decoding’, in Hall’s [1980] classic sense); the emotional experience of involvement from engaging (Peters, 2011); and the feelings and preferences more broadly associated with media devices (Madianou and Miller, 2013).

As Farman (2013: 17) notes, ‘With mobile phones that connect to the internet or GPS receivers that are utilized for a wide array of purposes, locating one’s self simultaneously in digital space and in material space has become an everyday action for many people. With this alteration of embodied space, the cultural objects we are producing and interacting with are also being transformed.’ News is no exception. And while recognition of such impacts is essential we must simultaneously be careful to note the limitations of a paradigm shift that points solely to the possibilities generated by the ubiquitous presence of media in our everyday lives. Many interrelations can be traced through digital approaches – for example who uses an app, where, when and potentially with whom – but considering how the consumption of news makes us orient toward different places, people, and issues, or conversely shy away, is a trickier business to capture with digital signals and storage alone. Similarly, speaking of the use of digital media artefacts to consume news (or any other form of media for that matter) as though they are neutral objects is also problematic. One should be wary of assuming mobile technologies or the spatial uses associated with them are sociologically neutral and it seems reasonable to assume that classic categories of analysis concerning social divisions and hierarchies – such as those associated with gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth – bear upon not only how we understand the adaptation and material integration of technology to consume news but, conversely, how the documenting capabilities of media themselves provide insight into the changing status of these categories themselves. To render problematic the uses of communication technology in everyday life demands multi-strand analyses, and thereby a renewed commitment to deploying creative methods to discern the interrelation between people, places and things and their imbrication in a host of frequently ephemeral forms and practices.

### *Mobilities (Movement and Media)*

Contemporary studies of media, including journalism, need to concern themselves with the ‘emplaced’ uses of media (Pink and Hjorth, 2012), in other words the way that media are both produced and consumed within the flow of everyday life, a life which is not static but one in which movement is key. Of course, movement is not unique to the digital era and historical precision demands that we recognize that the ‘mobility’ of computers and 4G telecommunications are not by themselves remarkable for journalism; newspapers, for instance, have also traditionally acted as a mobile interface that interacts both with the reader and with the surrounding social space in which it is consumed as have car radios. However, what is noteworthy about recent technological development is the way that they multiply and unshackle

the places and times where people may choose to consume news, and the types of social interactions and functions this in turn makes possible. As Jansson and Lindel (2015: 8) note, the shift from a mass media environment to a more diversified, digital media ecology, ‘implies that virtual and corporeal mobilities are combined in increasingly diversified and open-ended ways as media users may access any virtual space (including “news spaces”) from any geographical location through their miniaturized transmedia technologies.’ The *sine qua non* of mobile technologies is this movement and reconfigured flows, something which is not only confined to people of course, but to associated expectations and control over the speed, flow, and mobility of information in everyday life in general. In this respect, we should keep in mind that mobile media is only one aspect of a more broadly accelerated mobilization of life that encompasses goods, services, ideas, information, transport, travel, and communications (Elliott and Urry 2010).

Considering current shifts in digital journalism through this analytic prism of mobility helps alert us to what has transformed, while still recognizing the fundamental fact that news consumption has always been a sociocultural (i.e. oriented to others), spatiotemporal (i.e. situated within everyday life), and material (i.e. requiring one’s bodily presence and interface) practice. For instance, what is immediately apparent is how the rise of mobile technologies significantly impacts human interaction and communicative patterns. The rapid socialization of mobile phone usage, for instance, has altered a ‘bewildering and proliferating’ array of cultural activities (Goggin, 2006: 2). Research illustrates how the introduction of the mobile phone transformed aspects of identity-construction, community-formation, and belonging as well as more quotidian aspects of life such as keeping in touch, working, parenting, flirting, bullying, and maintaining personal finance (see also Ling, 2004; Horst and Miller, 2006; Baym, 2010). A consideration of the influence of mobiles on journalism then, benefits from looking holistically at news consumption within such a shifting informational ecology and asking what role ‘news’ (continues to) play in this equation. Schröder’s (2015) study about mobile news practices in Denmark, for instance, cautions that many other processes besides news consumption are equally if not more vital to how people traverse the terrain of everyday life. Digital cultures are interrelated, and in this respect it is difficult to quarantine attitudes people express towards journalism from other closely-related considerations.

Keeping this caveat in mind, in a world where convenient, mobile updates are not just the norm but an expectation, how informational flows transect and shape the day has significant impact both on the expectations of journalism and its real time integration by audiences. Moreover, these considerations dovetail. Sheller (2015: 20) has observed that what is telling about the data-sharing possibilities of contemporary digital technologies like smartphones is that they change the spatiotemporality of news events themselves; reporting becomes co-temporaneous and ‘may even precede the full unfolding of “the news”’. This constantly updated flow of ‘news now’, she argues, and mobile news practices such as agglomeration, curation, crowd-sourcing, updating, tagging, and sharing go far beyond just remaking news. Such changes in how information circulates transform ‘the very ground beneath our feet: ambient flows of news re-situate how we understand where we are, who we are connected with, what our “present” moment actually is. The now-ness of news, in other words, offers a new sense of the present’ (ibid.). In this respect, as in other walks of life, new mobile ways of consuming news in ‘always on’, itinerant societies correspond to shifts in the spatiotemporally-situated and socially-contextualized meanings individuals generate from such use as well as their assessment of the value of journalism as a cultural form.

## Conclusion

Aspects of interaction and personalization beget by new media technologies certainly shape the possibilities and power audiences have to choose news wherever, whenever, and however they



want. However, this simultaneously challenges the conventional routines and symbolic power of journalism as a place where, metaphorically, people can come together. Increasingly, the affordances of digital technology lead the creators of news content to valorize not only their informational aspects but the benefits of consumption in terms of associated participatory possibilities. Such a shift is often seen as paradigmatic (see Livingstone, 2013), and media audiences in general are often now conceptualized in terms of being individual users who wish to have greater control over their media offerings. Social media, for instance, is premised on allowing user to orient to others and interact and share based on personal preferences. And yet if we apply the same logic to the production and consumption of news, there becomes a tipping point wherein individualistic rhetoric and empowerment becomes anathema to the idea of journalism's traditional collective, public ethos. While digital tools may promote connection in a very literal sense, when analyzing the current shifting dynamics of audiences it is crucial we don't forget the societally-oriented discourses so ever-present during the previous era of mass media (see Peters and Witschge, 2015).

This is why spatiotemporal considerations of audiences are so important. News consumption, as is hopefully clear from above, is an associative practice whose importance derives from the connections it allows us to forge between places, people and things. Such intersections are held together through cultural representations and flows of information as much as the technological networks which so often form the focal point of much contemporary scholarship. In other words, thinking through what makes news consumption meaningful demands relational thinking, and such thinking is – both literally and figuratively – spatiotemporal. The dynamics of how the everyday digital geographies of contemporary media, communication, and information flows intersect with the everywhere 'lived' geographies of individuals is a crucial consideration going forth if we want to grasp how current shifts impact audience perceptions of news, of storytelling, of journalism. Increasingly, the idea of being able to communicate whenever, wherever, and while in motion is unremarkable, and the fact that one can combine and mix forms of auditory, oral, written, and visual communication while 'on the go' is expected. In such a seemingly 'fluid' mediascape, thinking 'spatiotemporally' helps us distinguish the unique from the routine, the extraordinary from the ordinary, the significant from the mundane, pointing to moments when metaphorically, we pause to think. This is imperative if we wish to capture the diverse meanings, connections, and experiences that audiences create out of the mediated content they consume, engage with, and augment. Day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year technology moves forward and its development and integration, and the impact of this development and integration, means considering the fundamental shifts this imparts on how people conceive of informational integration within their everyday lives.

## Further Reading

Of the many helpful insights into spatial theory I've read, Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) remains my go-to reference when pondering its significance. Consulting Phil Hubbard and Ron Kitchen's *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (2011, although not cited in this chapter) is an effective introduction to other touchstones while Paul Adams and André Jansson (2012) successfully illustrate how this thinking can be applied to enrich studies of media and communication. Adriana de Souza e Silva's (2006) article on 'hybrid spaces' remains an inspiration in terms of the interrelation between urban, mobile and online (social) spaces. Finally, the contributions comprising the special issue on 'The Spaces and Places of News Audiences' (*Journalism Studies*, 2015) provide stimulating examples of how the related conceptual terrains of spatial and social theory, political communication and mobility research, and audience and journalism studies can inform each other to advantage.

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